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SUBJECT: Montreal Celebrates OutGames Success - Part 2 of 2

Summary

¶1. The 1st World OutGames, held in Montreal June 26-August 5, drew some 500,000 spectators, 10,248 athletes, and 5,200 volunteers and has been touted by officials, media, and human rights activists alike as a success. The three-day conference on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Human Rights, which preceded the sports events, produced the Declaration of Montreal, a statement intended to guarantee the rights of the LGBT community throughout the world. Organizers and the Montreal Police told ConGen officers there were no reported homosexual hate crimes or incidents. By pursuing an LGBT human rights agenda simultaneously, the OutGames elicited public statements on LGBT rights and participation from a range of Canadian federal, provincial, and municipal elected officials, as well as business and community leaders. Finally, the OutGames reinforced Montreal's urban identity as an open and tolerant tourist destination, while also signaling LGBT human rights as a potential defining issue for Montreal voters in future elections.

Montreal vs. Chicago

¶2. The decision to host the 1st World OutGames in Montreal resulted from a dispute over the number of participants and over the scope of activities between Federation of Gay Games (FGG) and Montreal organizers, as the Gay Games were destined originally for Montreal. Montreal's organizers envisaged a large participant base, and wanted to include a human rights conference and many other side activities around the games. The Gay Games organizers, due to a history of financial trouble, wanted to pare down the event and focus only on sports competitions. After FGG organizers awarded the location of the Gay Games to Chicago (held June 15-22), Montreal organizers contemplated the future of Gay sports and as a result, founded a new international organization, the Gay and Lesbian International Sports Association (GLISA), currently headquartered in Ontario but soon to relocate its headquarters to Montreal. Two sports competitions resulted, both geared towards similar audiences, held within days of each other, six hundred miles apart. Despite the political gains, many considered the OutGames a financial risk for Montreal, particularly given the high debt incurred after previous experiences here hosting international sporting events. [See Reftel]

Outgames a "financial success?"

¶3. Despite the Outgames being held on the heels of the Gay Games, Montreal organizers and the Montreal Board of Trade quickly pointed to the financial benefits the games brought to the city, with an estimated C\$100 million being spent by athletes and other visitors during the games, according to the Montreal Board of Trade. (note: the Quebec Gay Chamber of Commerce offers a much higher estimate of C\$180 million) A representative from Montreal's Mayor's office told Econoff that the city's investment in the OutGames had a "long-term strategy, strictly from a business sense" to attract more gay tourists to the city, and convince OutGames participants to return to Montreal in the future. Despite this upbeat message, Montreal organizers had earlier announced that it would require a minimum of 13,000 paying participants to break even, and the games themselves only drew some 10,248 athletes, some of whom were sponsored by the Canadian government (though the number increases to more than 18,000 when one includes Conference participants, cultural event participants, and volunteers). OutGames organizers have yet to release any clear data on financial revenues (or losses) from the games, so details on the reality of their financial success remain sketchy. As with the majority of cultural and sporting events in Quebec, the OutGames received funding from the municipal, provincial, and federal government. OutGames organizers told Consulate officers that there were "significant" private industry contributions, although no precise figures on or breakdown of public or private assistance were provided, nor have any been published to date.

A good news story for human rights

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¶4. Aside from declaring financial success, OutGames organizers and Montreal city officials point to the human rights conference and the Declaration of Montreal the legacy and long-term impact of the OutGames. Montreal Police contacts as well as OutGames organizers told Consulate officials that the games occurred without any reported incidents of hate crimes or gay-targeted offensive behavior. However, a few media reports of homophobic comments made by four members of a Montreal-area water polo team emerged and led to calls for a formal apology and the four athletes' being removed from the team. The only frustration police encountered was actually found among their own ranks, for having to absorb the costs for force deployment and closing down many streets for a relatively small number of marathon runners (only 92) on the final day. Similarly, news about one Senegalese participant coming under fire upon his return to his home country traveled fast in human rights circles here. Cheikh Doudou Mbaye, a Senegalese social worker, who spoke at a workshop on homosexual discrimination in the workplace, faced public humiliation and harassment upon his return to Senegal, according to a senior representative of the Montreal-based International Center for Human Rights and Democratic Development and press reports. Otherwise, the city of Montreal (recently reported to be Canada's top tourist destination) provided participants with a welcoming atmosphere, with banners throughout the city promoting the games and gay pride, and OutGames participants to ride free on the city's public transportation.

¶5. The Human Rights conference, June 26-29, included a keynote speech by UN Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, and drew 1,500 participants in the first human rights conference of its kind to focus specifically on the rights of the LGBT community. The Conference included a section on homosexuality in the workforce, in partnership with the Quebec Gay Chamber of Commerce (QGCC). The

president of the QGCC told Econoff that he was especially pleased at the success of the Conference, because it allowed participants to focus on the concerns shared by homosexuals in a professional setting, and to develop strategies for better mobilizing actions within the LGBT business communities. He stated that although Montreal is an open and welcoming city for homosexuals, he encountered initial resistance from large Montreal-based corporations in making donations to both the QGCC as well as the OutGames. He said, however, he overcame this resistance and in fact, had succeeded in his fundraising efforts, adding "I have not gotten one 'no' in two years."

¶16. The Declaration of Montreal builds on the statement from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights and expands the acceptance of human diversity to cover different sexual orientations and gender identities. The Declaration of Montreal notes that "the oppression of LGBT people is a reality in most parts of the world" but that "more and more brave people are standing up for LGBT human rights." The Declaration sets out the "essential rights" for LGBT peoples, including the protection from state and private violence, freedom of expression, assembly, and association (for a full text of the declaration, go to <http://www.montreal2006.org>).

Outgames gain political support

¶17. Politicians from all levels of government attended OutGames events and awards ceremonies. Montreal's Mayor Gerald Tremblay was a constant vocal advocate for the games throughout their preparation and execution, spoke at the LGBT human rights conference, and hosted a number of receptions at city hall. In keeping with sporting events tradition, he passed the OutGames flag to Martin Geerson, Mayor of Culture and Leisure of Copenhagen, where the next OutGames is scheduled to take place in 2009. Benoit Labonte, the mayor of Ville-Marie, Montreal's downtown borough covering the financial and commercial district as well as the Gay Village, was an active supporter. Line Beauchamp, Minister of Culture and Communication, represented the Quebec Provincial government, while Yvone Marcoux, Quebec's Minister of Justice, was a keynote speaker at the LGBT Human Rights Conference. Gilles Duceppe, leader of the Bloc Quebecois, made an appearance

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at the OutGames opening ceremony and OutGames golf tournament. Real Menard, the openly-gay Bloc Quebecois Member of Parliament from the riding that encompasses the Olympic village, competed in the men's wrestling competition. Federal Minister of the Treasury Board John Baird attended a reception in honor of athletes from his home province of Ontario. Several Quebec and Ottawa Members of Parliament, from all parties, also attended the Games.

¶18. Just as it opened, the OutGames ended with a festive closing ceremony that included participation by American icon Liza Minnelli and popular Quebec musical artists, Montreal's Mayor Gerald Tremblay, Copenhagen's Mayor Martin Geerson, Quebec Minister for Culture and Communication, Line Beauchamp, and Jean-Marc Fournier, Minister of Education, Sports, and Recreation, as well as Michael Fortier, Federal Minister of Public Works. In sharp contrast to the opening ceremony when Michael Fortier, Federal Minister of Public Works and Services, received stadium-wide jeers because of the LGBT community's dissatisfaction with the Conservative Party's position on LGBT rights, particularly same sex marriage, (Mayor Tremblay intervened, asking the audience to extend the same tolerance and respect that Montrealers are known for and expect), Jean-Marc Fournier, Minister of Education, Sports

and Recreation, was better received during the closing ceremonies.

Comment

19. In addition to being a good news story for human rights in Montreal (and the desire to extend those rights elsewhere in the world), the popularity of the OutGames in Montreal demonstrates how many Quebecers take issue with the Conservative government's stance on gay marriage. Virtually all polls taken in Quebec have shown that a majority of the province's population favors gay marriage, with a recent poll conducted by Environics between May 29 and June 2 indicating that two thirds of Quebecers support gay marriage. As GLISA prepares to move its headquarters to Montreal and looks ahead to the 2009 world OutGames in Copenhagen, the issue of LGBT rights will continue to be an important one for Montrealers, and could play a role in future municipal, provincial and federal elections, as Quebec pursues its self-proclaimed international role on social and cultural issues.

Marshall